COOL STORY BRO:
UNDERSTANDING THE COMPELLING FACTORS OF PERSONAL STORIES

Hava Kane

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Andrew C. Butler
Department of Educational Psychology
Primary Advisor

Diane L. Schallert
Department of Educational Psychology
Second Reader

Abstract

Author:	Hava Kane
Title:	Cool Story Bro: Understanding the Compelling Factors of Personal Stories
Supervising Professor:	Andrew C. Butler, Ph.D., M.A.

Stories surround us in our lives. We are constantly reminded of their importance. Clearly, stories serve some sort of powerful function for the human psyche. Stories shed light on human behavior in a multitude of ways, but the specific elements that make personal stories central to humanity are still largely unknown. If these elements could be better actualized, understood, and harnessed, the applications could lead to the betterment of people's lives on both an individual and communal scale. I hope that my study will add to the cultural and psychological conversation regarding the power of story, and that new understanding can be transformed into tangible, practical ways of harnessing story for humanistic purposes.

The current study is a highly exploratory first step in examining the elements that make personal stories compelling to other people. We employed ideas from different areas within psychology such as autobiographical memory, text processing, and linguistics to investigate these elements. We coded 48 existing personal stories from *The Moth* podcast along various dimensions and collected data on people's experiences while listening to the stories. We combined these datasets to understand if the *who*, *what*, and *how* elements of stories predicted whether listeners found the *Moth* stories compelling. Though not all story factors analyzed were significant predictors of compelling-ness, many of our measures were found to influence listeners' experience and subsequent ratings. Our results suggest that what makes a personal story compelling depends on a variety of elements including *who*, *what*, and *how* the story is being told.

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Introduction

"The universe is made of stories, not of atoms" ~ Muriel Rukeyser

Stories may be as fundamental to the human experience as our anatomy. As psychologist Dan McAdams asserts in his groundbreaking book, *The Stories We Live By*, "each of us is a natural-born storyteller. We seek to make sense of the chaos of modern experience by arranging the episodes of our lives through the stories we tell" (p. 11). Without stories, life appears to just be a set of raw experiences, inherently meaningless. Much like a collection of atoms would be aimless without a bodily system, experiences remain static until we infuse them with meaning and weave them together into a coherent narrative. The beauty and complexity of this process is that it is uniquely human.

I only began consciously framing my own life story around the value of stories a few years ago. Prior to intellectualizing stories, I was simply that kid who loved people watching. Despite my parent's perpetual admonition that staring was rude, I couldn't help but speculate about the life stories of complete strangers. When I watched people, I would often worry that someone would stare right back and ask me why I was so keen to observe them. It wasn't until I began to explore the psychology of stories, to listen avidly to storytelling podcasts, and to involve myself in local storytelling shows that I would know how to answer that. People watching became the manifestation of a larger, more meaningful awareness that those around me mattered and that each of them carried their own life stories. My growing involvement in the art of storytelling continually revealed one notion to me: that there is something visceral in the act of telling a story and in the act of listening to

the stories of others. But what was the source of this powerful exchange? What makes a personal story compelling?

A deeper investigation into the psychology of narrative enabled me to glean that the observer is part of the observed**.** The ability to examine the guardrails that keep each of us on our individual path is valuable in assuring that we stay on them. With all of these ideas swarming around in my brain, infusing my life with new meaning, I naturally jumped at the opportunity to put these theories to the test in a psychologically meaningful way and through a scientific approach. I hope that this study will add to the cultural and psychological conversation regarding the power of story, and that new understanding can be transformed into tangible, practical ways of harnessing story for humanistic purposes. Thus begins the story of the current research.

Literature Review

The question of what makes a personal story compelling to others has not been directly examined through a psychological lens. However, we drew upon the surrounding literature regarding the psychology of stories to inform our current study. We mainly crafted our study around theories of autobiographical memory, text processing, and linguistics.

Autobiographical Memory

A large body of research has examined the close connection between stories and memory. Specifically, autobiographical memory (AM) refers to the memories we hold regarding ourselves and the events in our lives. Autobiographical memory is characterized as memory across the lifespan for both specific events and self-related information (Baddeley, 2009). Researchers are beginning to study the functions it serves for people to remember, reflect on, and share the experiences of their lives, which is not far from questioning the function of storytelling (Bluck, Alea, Habermas, & Rubin, 2005). When we tell a personal story, we draw directly upon our AM. Thus, an understanding of the functions of AM lends insight into the functions of telling and listening to stories. People retell events for different reasons. Retelling perspective can also affect the way that a listener experiences and remembers a story. For example, Dudukovic, Marsh, & Tversky (2004) found that stories told for the purpose of entertainment vs. accuracy changed the quality and quantity of later recall. The three most commonly identified theoretical functions of AM are directive, self, and social (Bluck et al., 2009). The *Moth* stories seem to naturally incorporate these functions, and we predict that listeners might be

compelled by stories to the degree that they incorporate these three functions. The coding schemes and metrics of compelling-ness that we developed in our survey were based largely upon the three theoretical functions of AM.

The directive function suggests that we use autobiographical memory of the past to guide present and future thought and behaviors (Bluck et al., 2009). Many of the stories in our dataset seem to contain a directive function. The narrative arcs of storytellers often follow a pattern of self-growth from previous life experience. The storytellers almost always learn from an experience by retelling it with a fresh outlook. The survey ratings we collected seem to reflect that compelling stories serve a directive function for the listener as well. Some of the survey questions we developed assessed the directive function of stories on listeners, particularly the questions of whether a story might be useful to the listener's future, whether the listener learned from the story, and whether the story was memorable (see Appendix C).

The self function suggests that we use autobiographical memory to maintain a coherent sense of identity overtime, and that we use memory to promote the continuity and development of the self (Bluck et al., 2009). Many of the stories in our dataset seem to encompass this function. The majority of *Moth* storytellers relate their life experiences back to their identity. McAdams (2001) life story model of identity supports this function of stories. He claims that as storytellers we "selectively appropriate aspects of [our] experience and imaginatively construe both past and future to construct stories that make sense to [us] and to [our] audiences, that vivify and integrate life and make it more or less meaningful" (p. 106). Telling

stories promotes self-knowledge, self-enhancement, self-concept preservation, and emotional regulation. The survey ratings we collected seem to reflect that compelling stories serve an important function for the identity of the listener as well. Some of the survey questions we developed assessed the self function of stories on listeners, particularly the questions of how much emotion the listener experienced and how relatable the story was to the listener's own life (see Appendix C).

The social function suggests that autobiographical memory is important in developing, maintaining, and nurturing social bonds (Bluck et al., 2009). Autobiographical memories appear to facilitate social interaction by providing material for conversations, allowing people to be more believable and persuasive, and inducing empathic responses from listeners. The exchange of stories between speaker and listener can create new social bonds, and/or increase the intimacy of an existing relationship (Bluck et al., 2009). The majority of stories in our dataset seem to include a social function. All *Moth* stories contain a relationship component, and all storytellers clearly aim to make their stories communicative and coherent to an audience. McAdams (2001) underscores the social utility of stories, stating "in all human cultures, people tell stories to other people. The very concept of a story is inherently social in that stories exist to be told in a social context" (p. 114). He goes on to suggest that the construction of self-defining memories and life stories is always a "social enterprise" and that even when an audience is absent, "stories may retain their social character", always formulated "with both external and internalized audiences in mind" (p. 114). It is clear in our database of *Moth* stories

that storytellers consciously craft their delivery with an audience in mind, all aiming to resonate with other people on some level. McAdams (2001) also highlighted the inherent connection between stories and culture, arguing that stories are "born, they grow, they proliferate, and they eventually die according to the norms, rules, and traditions that prevail in a given society, according to a society's implicit understandings of what counts as a tellable story" (p. 114). All *Moth* storytellers reference shared cultural knowledge in an effort to make their story more compelling to listeners. The survey ratings we collected seem to reflect that compelling stories serve a social function for the listener as well. Some of the survey questions we developed assessed the social function of stories on listeners, particularly the questions of how compelled listeners were to share the story, how relatable the story was, and how much emotion they experienced during the story (see Appendix C).

Text Processing

Text processing theory is the study of the cognitive processes involved as people process (and ultimately understand) the words, phrases, and sentences that make up larger bodies of language use such as stories, articles, novels, etc. (Gernsbacher & Kaschak, 2013). The manner in which we comprehend and experience a story is a prerequisite to whether we'll find it compelling. Story comprehension is not simply about understanding the words and language used; it is about integration of that language into a larger understanding of what is being talked about and extracting meaning from it (Gernsbacher & Kaschak, 2013). When we are fully engaged in a story, we strive to fill in the details to achieve global and

local coherence of the content. As Graesser & Forsyth (2013) explains, however, communication breakdowns can interrupt a listener's comprehension of a story. Misalignments in a storyteller's language usage such as mispronounced words, rare words, foreign accents, or ungrammatical sentences are common examples of communication breakdowns. We predict that when such interruptions to comprehension occur, listeners are less likely to rate a story as compelling. We also predict that audience feedback (known in the literature as "backchannel feedback") such as gasping, clapping, or laughing during *Moth* stories allows storytellers to gauge how well they are communicating their story (Gernsbacher & Kaschak, 2013). We expect listeners to behave differently, expending varying amounts of strategic effort in comprehending the stories, depending on how compelling they find it. The survey ratings we collected seem to reflect that text processing is a significant predictor of story compelling-ness. Some of the survey questions we developed assessed listener comprehension, particularly the questions of how lost the listener was in the story, how much the listener's mind wandered, and how much the listener desired to hear the story again (see Appendix C). Another implementation of text processing theory was our "Listener Check" question after each story, which was asked to confirm that the participant comprehended enough of the story's plot to verifiably rate it along other metrics (see Appendix C).

Another aspect of text processing theory that is important to understanding the utility of stories comes from Script Theory. Broadly, Script Theory suggests that human behavior falls into patterns called "scripts" because they function analogously to the way a written script does, by providing a program for action

(Tomkins, 1987). Many more specific categories of scripts exist. Examples include social scripts (culture-specific, internalized information depending on characteristics of an individual's community) and behavioral scripts (sequences of expected behaviors for a given situation, including countless default standards for how events are expected to occur in a particular situation). Lifescripts are a particularly relevant form of scripts to understanding personal stories. Lifescripts are culturally shared representations and expectations of the timing of major transitional life events (Berntsen & Rubin, 2004). Theory suggests that these lifescripts structure our autobiographical memory from birth; in other words, as individuals we are constantly comparing our personal life narratives to the cultural narrative that has been handed down from older generations, stories, and observations of prior behavior within the same culture. The theory proposes that our identity's coherence hinges to some degree on how closely our personal lifescript matches the cultural script at any given time or event (Berntsen & Rubin, 2004). There appears to be a script regarding what constitutes a compelling story. Our study is a first step in understanding the nature of that script.

As listeners, we develop a mental model of a story and situate it amongst our existing expectations from the lifescript. When a story deviates from our notion of the lifescript, it seems to impact how compelling we find it. Previous research indicates that compelling stories shatter our expectations, capturing our attention and encoding our memory (Berntsen & Rubin, 2004). We predict that *Moth* stories which deviate from audiences' expectations of normative events will be rated as more compelling than stories that fit neatly into the lifescript. Some of the survey

questions we developed assessed the influence of scripts, particularly the questions of how relatable, shareable, and memorable the story was (see Appendix C).

Linguistics

The lexicon is integral to understanding stories, as language is the direct means by which we share and communicate our stories. Language is known in collective memory research as a cultural tool that binds individuals to the collective conscience. Language socially situates individuals, connecting the storyteller to the listener (Wertsch & Roediger, 2008). As Tausczik & Pennebaker's (2010) computerized text analysis studies have revealed, "the words we use in daily life reflect who we are and the social relationships we are in" (p. 25). Furthermore, language is "the most common and reliable way for people to translate their internal thoughts and emotions into a form that others can understand. Words and language, then, are the very stuff of psychology and communication. They are the medium by which cognitive, personality, clinical, and social psychologists attempt to understand human beings" (p. 25). Psychologists analyze language for many reasons, including understanding how people talk to each other, how narratives of trauma evolve, how language can be therapeutic, and how persuasion occurs (Pennebaker, 1997). Our study is a new application of text analysis. We are implementing this powerful tool to understand the elements of language that predict how compelled people are by personal stories. We anticipate that language usage will be a significant predictor of how compelled listeners are by personal stories. For example, perhaps the duration of a *Moth* story or the formality of the language greatly influences listener ratings.

Current Study

Our approach to the question of what makes for a compelling story comprised of a few main steps. The first step was finding a database of stories to analyze, the second involved coding and categorizing the stories along various psychological dimensions, and the third was asking people to rate how compelling they found the stories to be across a variety of potential measures. The main goal of this approach was to discover whether any of the story elements we coded for predicted how compelling people found the personal stories of others.

Methods

Participants

111 undergraduate students at the University of Texas participated for course credit. Participants were recruited from the Educational Psychology Department Subject Pool. They signed up for the study using the Educational Psychology Department Subject Pool website (https://utexas-edp.sona-systems.com).

Procedures

Accessing Story Database

The database of stories under examination was collected through the following process. We conducted an initial search for collections of autobiographical stories with audio transcripts available online. We narrowed down the story collections based on their usefulness in the following criteria:
audio transcript accessibility, collection size, duration, format (autobiographical,

podcast, live-telling, written), purpose (personal, entertainment, historical, educational), and the diversity of themes within the collection.

Based on these criteria, the most appropriate database to employ for this study was *The Moth*, an organization that showcases true, personal stories told live and without notes. Each of the stories was told live during a *Moth* sponsored storytelling event throughout the United States and then distributed via *The Moth* Podcast and on *The Moth* website. We chose this database for a few main reasons. Firstly, the stories were accessible online, allowing us to analyze the transcripts and listen to the audio recordings. Secondly, *Moth* stories typically range from 5 to 20 minutes in duration, serving as a reasonable length for our experimental purposes. Thirdly, *Moth* stories cover a range of human experiences and themes, making them an interesting dataset to analyze.

The accessibility of *The Moth's* audio transcripts and the sample size available to the public were initially unclear. The metadata for *Moth* stories is not currently complete or fully available for public use. In response to this problem, *StoryScribe* is a community driven project that is currently working to make hundreds of Moth stories accessible online. According to the *StoryScribe* website, thousands of libraries and public media organizations publish large digital audio collections, but without transcripts, these rich cultural documents have remained in the digital dark; unsearchable and inaccessible to the hearing impaired. With generous support provided by the Knight Prototype Fund, an initiative of the John S. and James L. Knight Foundation, and their partners at

New York Public Library, *The Moth* build "Together We Listen", a project dedicated to solving this challenge.

The Moth sent the audio recordings of their stories to Pop Up Archive to create transcripts using speech-to-text software. The next step was to make these computer-generated transcripts accurate by engaging the online community. *Moth* fans, oral history aficionados, public media enthusiasts and story lovers around the world are all pitching in to make these transcripts accurate, keyword searchable and accessible. Every time someone edits a transcript, it is compared against other people's edits. After the transcripts have been corrected and approved, they will be uploaded to *The Moth's* website for everyone to see and search. This means that if you're trying to find a favorite story, you'll be able to type in a word you remember and find just what you're looking for, and it will make stories accessible to other populations such as researchers and the hearing impaired.

Through the *StoryScribe* project, we were able to access the audio transcripts of 48 *Moth* stories. Although more than 48 audio recordings are uploaded on the website, we chose 48 stories because this number enabled us to divide the sample evenly by groups of four when conducting our survey. The following procedure was employed to collect the raw text of the audio transcripts from the *StoryScribe* online database:

(1) Click on the "Browse Stories" tab on the *StoryScribe* website (http://storyscribe.themoth.org).
(2) Click Sort by: Completeness (Most to Least) (http://storyscribe.themoth.org/?sort_by=completeness&order=desc).
(3) Click on any story that has 100% consensus reached by contributors, indicated by a fully filled green bar icon.
(4) Highlight and copy entire audio transcript page (on Mac, using command A and command C functions).

(5) Paste entire audio transcript page onto Text Edit blank document (command - option - shift – V function).
(6) Using URL link at bottom of Text Edit audio transcript, delete timestamps in URL and copy/paste URL link into new browser tab (this will give you a clean text copy of the audio transcript without timestamps or spacing issues).
(7) Copy/paste (command – option – shift – V function) the entire transcript from the browser tab onto a blank Text Edit document.
(8) Save Text Edit transcripts according to this format # in our collection_speaker name_story title.

Coding Story Database

To verify the accuracy of the audio transcripts and categorize each transcript's components for analysis, we listened to each story through *The Moth's* online story library. Following along with the written transcripts, transcripts were checked for grammatical and typological errors. When possible, written indications of audience reactions such as laughter and applause were added.

Each transcript was categorized by the following information, available through *The Moth's* online story library and the *StoryScribe* website (Appendix A). We mainly categorized the stories by *who* was telling the story— gender and expertise level (Appendix A), *what* the story was about— positive or negative valence and humor content, and *how* the story was told— word and language usage categories (Appendix B). We coded the language usage of the 48 stories according to a computerized text analysis method called Linguistic Inquiry and Word Count (LIWC). LIWC is a transparent text analysis program that counts words in psychologically meaningful categories. Empirical results using LIWC demonstrate its ability to detect meaning in a wide variety of experimental settings, including to show attentional focus, emotionality, social relationships, thinking styles, and

individual differences (Tausczik & Pennebaker, 2010). This method was useful in our analysis of individual differences across storytellers and potential patterns in listener ratings. We received the LIWC data by submitting our 48 transcripts to the computerized program and choosing a subset of the LIWC dictionary for our analysis (Appendix B).

Collecting Listener Data

We collected data on people's experiences while listening to these stories to investigate whether the elements we coded for predicted listener compelling-ness across 10 proposed metrics. Listener feedback data was obtained in the following manner:

Participants were recruited from the Educational Psychology Department (EDP) Subject Pool. They signed up through EDP Subject Pool Website (https://utexas-edp.sona-systems.com), which recorded their name and contact information (e.g., email address, etc.). The experiment consisted of a single session and was conducted on a computer using Qualtrics (a web-based resource for collecting data; https://utexas.qualtrics.com). During the session, participants were taken through the informed consent process.

During the experiment, participants listened to a random selection of four stories from the 48 *Moth* stories in our database. After listening to each story, participants answered a series of 11 questions about their listening experience; all survey questions aimed to capture how compelling listeners found each story (see Appendix C). Question 11 was a "Listener Check" to verify that participants listened to each story in its entirety (see Appendix C). Participants were also asked to fill out

a brief demographics questionnaire. Answering each question on the questionnaire was optional (see Appendix C).

Results

Overview

Here's the story of our results. Who, what, and how findings were categorized in order to begin to answer the question of what makes a compelling personal story. "Compelling-ness" is subjectively captured and defined by our 10 survey metrics: Interest, Transportation, Mind Wander, Emotions, Life Relevance, Learn, Future Use, Share, Remember, and Hear Again (see Appendix C). Although all of the survey questions represent plausible measures of compelling-ness, all metrics correlated highly with Interest. Therefore, we centered our foregoing analysis on Interest as the primary metric of story compelling-ness. Interest was a good focal point for our interpretation of story compelling-ness, but we referenced other survey metrics as appropriate.

Survey Results

How compelling did participants find the stories?

The main question we aimed to answer in our study was whether participants found the personal stories compelling. We primarily defined compelling as "interesting" for our analysis, but we also ventured to define compelling-ness by an additional nine metrics, (Interest, Transportation, Mind Wander, Emotions, Life Relevance, Learn, Future Use, Share, Remember, Hear Again), because we reckoned that compelling is a complex and subjective notion.

Table 1 shows the results of the listener feedback survey. On average, Interest ratings for the 48 stories were high, indicating that participants generally

found the stories compelling. Among all the survey metrics, Interest had the highest average rating (M = 3.2, SD = 1.2), which made it a good metric to focus our analysis on. The standard deviations for all survey metrics indicate relatively high variation across ratings (SD > 1). The highest listener ratings fell under the categories of Interest (M = 4.4), Emotions (M = 4.4), Share (M = 4.2), Remember (M = 4.1), and Transportation (M = 4.1). The lowest listener ratings fell under the categories of Life Relevance (M = 1.3), Future Use (M = 1.3) and Share (M =1.3). That said, however, the descriptive data generally indicates high variation in the participant ratings, allowing us to explore a wide array of relationships in what makes a compelling story.

Which stories did participants find compelling?

Table 2 shows how interesting participants found each of the 48 stories. The interest ratings confirm that participants varied greatly in which stories they found compelling. Some stories were rated as much more compelling than others across various metrics. “800 Heroes”, “The Best Of Times, The Worst Of Times”, “A Very Dangerous Person”, and “A Blind Ear” were rated among the most interesting stories in our sample with low variability across participants (M > 4.0, SD < 1.3). “Dinner At Elaine's”, “About To Eat Cake”, “Alone Across The Arctic” and “A Country Boy's Journey” were rated as the least interesting stories in our sample with low variability across participants (M ≤ 2.5, SD ≤ 1.3). The four stories in our sample that yielded the most variation in Interest were “As If I Was Not There”, “A Detroiter in Paris”, “Empathetic Subway Screaming” and “An Impossible Choice” (SD ≥ 1.6). The high variability across all of the stories (SD ≥ 0.4) indicates that participants differed

significantly in which stories they found compelling. Greater variability in our sample allowed us to examine a variety of potential contributing factors to participants' ratings.

By what metrics did participants find the stories compelling?

Even though Interest was our primary metric, there are other ways that we aimed to measure compelling-ness. Table 3 shows the relationships between the ten different metrics of story compelling-ness, indicating that survey responses were indeed intercorrelated. All survey metrics yielded significant correlations (at the 0.01 level (two-tailed)), giving us a wide array of relationships to potentially analyze. Based on the results of the correlation matrix, we focused our analysis on Interest because all other survey metrics correlated highly with Interest, so interest level was the broadest category for compelling-ness. The highest correlated survey metric with Interest was Hear Again (r = .70). This correlation indicates that participants who found a story more interesting were more likely to want to hear the story again. It logically follows that if you find a story interesting, you would feel compelled to listen to it again. Interest was also highly correlated with participant likelihood to share the stories with others (r = .66), to experience emotions (r = .66) and to be transported by the story (r = .65). These results confirm our prediction that when you find a story interesting, you feel compelled to share the story with others. It also makes sense that when you are interested in a story, you are more likely to feel immersed in it, experiencing more emotions.

Other particularly high correlations existed between survey metrics,

indicating that there are a plethora of contributing factors to what makes a personal story compelling. The highest overall correlation was between Future Use and Learn (r = .76), meaning that participants who claimed to have learned a great deal from the story also rated the story as more useful to their future. This relationship indicates that stories can teach us valuable lessons, and when they do, we feel more compelled to apply them to future situations in our lives. Participants who wanted to hear a story again were also highly likely to want to share the story with someone (r = .72) and to remember the story (r = .67). Participants who were highly likely to share the story with someone also rated the story as highly memorable (r = .68) and as highly useful to their future (r = .66). These relationships indicate that compelling stories might serve various functions. A social function may compel us to share the story, a directive function may compel us to apply the story to our future, and a self function compels us to remember the story as it applies to our own life.

Negative correlations only existed when correlating survey metrics with Mind Wander. Participants whose mind wandered a great deal during a story were less likely to rate it as interesting (r = -.45), and found themselves less lost in the story (r = -.34). It logically follows that participants whose mind wandered a great deal were less likely to rate the story as compelling on any of the other survey questions. If a story doesn't keep your interest, you will probably be less likely to share, remember, or find it useful to your future. Mind Wander thus served as a good manipulation check on our correlation matrix.

Who Results

Does who is telling the story predict compelling-ness?

In this section of the results we focused on the element of *who* the storyteller is and whether it predicted the degree to which listeners found the story compelling. *Who* factors we focused on included the storytellers' gender and level of storytelling expertise.

Does gender predict story compelling-ness?

Table 4 is the results of an independent sample t-test comparing survey ratings and storyteller gender. Very little difference existed across average Interest ratings or other survey ratings of male vs. female storytellers. This finding indicates that in our collection of stories, the gender of the storyteller didn't matter much in determining whether people found the stories interesting. On average, participants rated stories told by males (M = 2.3, SD = .52) as more useful to their future than stories told by females (M = 1.9, SD = .47). The gender of the storyteller did not appear to make a significant difference in how interesting participants found the stories. Overall, people found *Moth* stories told by males and females to be roughly equally compelling.

Does expertise predict story compelling-ness?

We also examined whether storyteller expertise was a significant predictor of how compelling participants found the stories. The defining criteria for an "experienced" or a "novice" storyteller were based on *The Moth* storyteller biographies online. Storytellers who were described as stand up comics, acclaimed writers, actors, seasoned *Moth* performers, prominent/acclaimed storytellers,

journalists, broadcasters, or podcasters were categorized as "experienced" storytellers. Storytellers whose descriptions lacked these criteria were categorized as "novice" storytellers. Table 6 shows the results of an independent sample t-test comparing survey ratings and storyteller expertise. Although none of the means yielded significant relationships on Levene's test, participants generally rated stories told by novice storytellers (M = 3.13 SD = .59) as more interesting than those told by experienced storytellers (M =3.42 SD = .47). In fact, participants' average survey ratings were higher across all factors for stories told by novice storytellers.

What Results

Does the theme of a story predict its compelling-ness?

In this section of the results we focused on the element of *what* the story was about and whether the content of a story predicted if people found a story compelling. *What* factors we focused on were two specific themes: tone and humor. The defining criterion for a negatively toned story was if it contained themes or events that we deemed negative, or if it contained elements of both positivity and negativity. The defining criterion for a positively toned story was if it contained themes or events that we deemed lacking in negativity. The defining criterion for a "humorous" story was if it garnered laughs from the audience. The defining criterion for a "serious" story was if it did not garner laughs from the audience. We were fully aware of the subjectivity of this criterion, but our ability to categorize themes objectively was limited by the nature of the database.

Does the tone of a story predict its compelling-ness?

The tone of a story was a significant predictor of its compelling-ness among our participants. Out of the 48 stories, 29 were positively tone and 19 were negatively tone (or a mixture of positive and negative elements). On average, participants found negative stories significantly more interesting than positive stories ($t(46)$ = -3.116, p = .003). Participants also tended to experience significantly more emotions during negative stories than during positive stories ($t(46)$ = -4.453, p = .0001). On average, participants reportedly learned more ($t(46)$ = -5.717, p = .0001) during negative stories, found them more useful to their future ($t(46)$ = -5.023, p = .0001), and were more likely to want to hear them again ($t(46)$ = -3.811, p = .001). People found negative stories more compelling than positive stories across all metrics.

Does the humor of a story predict its compelling-ness?

The degree of humor in a story was a significant predictor of its compelling-ness, but only by three of the 10 compelling-ness metrics. Out of the 48 stories, 26 contained humor and 22 lacked humor. The degree of humor in a story was not a significant predictor of how interesting participants found the story. On average, participants found stories lacking humor to induce significantly more emotions than stories containing humor ($t(46)$ = -2.727, p = .009). Participants learned significantly more from stories lacking humor ($t(46)$ = -4.459, p = .0001). Our results also indicated that participants found stories lacking humor more useful to their future than humorous stories ($t(46)$ = -3.261, p = .002).

Who and What Results

Does who the storyteller is predict what the story is about?

We were curious whether any significant relationships existed between storytellers and themes. We examined the relationships between gender, expertise, and themes. A higher percentage of stories told by both genders were positive. 57% of stories told by males were positive (*N* = 16) and 43% of stories were negative (*N* = 12). 65% of stories told by females were positive (*N* = 13) and 35% were negative (*N* = 7). A higher percentage of stories told by females contained humor. 43% of male stories contained humor (*N* = 12) and 57% did not contain humor (*N* = 16). 70% of female stories contained humor (*N* = 14) and 30% did not contain humor (*N* =6). Storytellers of both experience levels told more positive stories. 64% of stories told by experts were positive (*N* = 18) and 36% were negative (*N* = 10). 55% of stories told by non-experts were positive (*N* = 11) and 45% were negative (*N* = 9). Storytellers of both experience levels contained slightly more humor. 54% of stories told by experts contained humor (*N* = 15) and 46% did not contain humor (*N* = 13). 55% of stories told by non-experts contained humor (*N* = 11) and 45% did not contain humor (*N* = 9). Overall, the gender or expertise of the storyteller did not significantly predict tone or humor of a story.

How Results

How does language usage differ across stories?

To glean greater insight into the nature of stories and what might make them compelling, we closely examined how the stories were told, particularly patterns in language usage. Table 10 shows the relationships between twelve LIWC Dimensions

that were indeed intercorrelated, indicating that there are significant patterns across language usage categories and in how stories were told. A strong correlation was found between social words and pronoun usage (r = .66), indicating that people who talked about social processes used more pronouns to tell their stories. Positive (r = .76) and negative (r = .58) emotion words were also highly correlated with affect words, which makes sense because positive and negative emotions are a sub-dimension of affective process words in the LIWC dictionary.

Perceptual process words such as "look", "hear" and "feel" were negatively correlated with cognitive process words such as "cause", "know", and "ought", meaning that storytellers who used more perceptual process words were less likely to use cognitive process words (r = -.35). Storytellers who used more cognitive process words were also more likely to use positive emotional words (r = .46). Storytellers who used more present tense words were less likely to use words in the past tense (r = .80), and storytellers who focused more on the future were less likely to speak in past tense (r = -.34). Storytellers who used future tense words were more likely to speak in present tense.

Does gender affect how people tell stories?

We were interested in examining whether the gender of the storyteller predicted how people told their personal stories. Were there significant differences in how males and females told stories? Table 5 shows the results of an independent sample t-test comparing the language usage of male and female storytellers. We only examined a fraction of the lexical dimensions in the LIWC dictionary based on the relevance of certain dimensions. Overall, language usage did not differ

significantly in stories told by males and females. However, slight differences did arise. Males used a larger percentage of power words such as "superior" and "bully" ($t(46)$ = -2.851, p = .003). Males also used a larger percentage of past tense words such as "ago", "did" and "talked" ($t(46)$ = -2.848, p = .007). Females tended to use a larger percentage of present tense words such as "today", "is", and "now" ($t(46)$ = 2.235, p = .030). Females also tended to use a slightly larger percentage of informal language ($t(46)$ =2.729, p = .009) such as swear words ($t(46)$ = 2.067, p = .044).

Does expertise affect how people tell stories?

We were curious about whether novice and experienced storytellers told stories differently, specifically with regards to language usage. Table 7 shows the results of an independent samples t-test comparing the language usage of experienced and inexperienced storytellers. On average, novice storytellers used a significantly greater percentage of pronouns than experienced storytellers ($t(46)$ = -2.391, p = .021). Experienced storytellers used a significantly greater percentage of leisure words such as "cook", "chat", and "movie" ($t(46)$ = 2.706, p = .01).

Does theme affect how people tell stories?

As we anticipated, a story's tone does predict how it is told to a significant extent. Negative stories (M =1649.89) were slightly longer than positive stories (M = 1597.93), on average. Positive stories contained a significantly higher percentage of positive emotion words than negative emotion words ($t(46)$ = 2.145, p = .037) and vice versa ($t(46)$ = -2.371, p = .022). Negative stories also contained a significantly higher percentage of risk-related words such as "danger" and "doubt" than positive stories ($t(46)$ = -2.903, p = .006). A story's humor level does influence how it is told

to a certain extent. Stories lacking humor contained a significantly higher percentage of past-tense words ($t(46)$ = -2.000, p = .051). Humorous stories contained a significantly higher percentage of words about religion ($t(46)$ = 1.994, p = .052) and a significantly higher degree of informal language ($t(46)$ = -2.224, p = .031).

Discussion

Moral of the Story?

The primary objective of this study was to determine the elements of personal stories that might make them compelling to listeners. As predicted, many of the story elements we coded for were indeed contributing factors to listeners' ratings of compelling-ness. Our research was highly exploratory, meaning that we did not make detailed predictions as to how each story element might predict listener ratings, but many of the relationships we uncovered helped us begin to answer our initial question of what makes a compelling personal story. Previous research has focused on the importance of stories, but this study was an important first step in understanding what psychological elements make a personal story compelling to listeners.

Overall, people found the 48 *Moth* stories compelling, indicating that our metrics captured compelling-ness to some degree. This finding verifies previous research on the value of storytelling, which suggests that people are compelled by the personal stories of others and that there are meaningful psychological relationships in the exchange of stories for both storytellers and listeners. We did not discover a "perfect recipe" for a compelling story, but it is silly to predict that such a formula even exists. The high variability across stories and ratings suggests that compelling stories are a complex aggregate of psychological elements and individual differences. In our study, we found that *who* was telling the story did not predict compelling-ness as much as *what* the story was about. But in general, many factors contribute to a story's compelling-ness, varying contextually.

Our analysis revealed that some stories were rated as significantly more compelling than others along various metrics. The stories rated most interesting seemed to be those that contained themes of immediate danger or suspense. Text processing theory supports the idea that themes of danger and suspense make listeners particularly immersed in a story (Gerrig & Jacovina, 2009). Such research suggests that readers like to function as problem solvers; their experiences of suspense are heightened as paths to a solution fall away (Gerrig & Jacovina, 2009). One of the highest rated stories, "800 Heroes", was about a school shooting and another, "A Very Dangerous Man", was about a serial killer who picks up a hitchhiker. These themes seem to compel listeners greatly, especially with regards to how interested and transported they are by the stories. The stories rated least interesting seemed to be those that lacked suspense. They might have been fun to listen to, but lighthearted and positive themes did not seem to lend themselves to high ratings, at least in terms of memory or usefulness in the future.

The finding that our ten compelling-ness metrics were intercorrelated is supported by the psychological literature on autobiographical memory. Autobiographical memory indicates that listening to personal stories serves many overlapping functions. Our prediction that compelling stories fulfill a constellation of listener expectations and functions (directive, self, and social) was directly supported by our data. For example, the correlations between learning, future use, and memory seem to confirm the directive function of stories. As the research suggests, stories help us use "past experience to construct models that allow us to understand the inner world of others and thereby to predict their future

behavior…individuals report remembering past events and the lessons they learned from them as useful in guiding present or future behavior" (Bluck et al., 2009). The correlation between desire to hear a story again and to share a story supports the social function of AM. As theory suggests, "sharing autobiographical memories with someone who was not present provides the listener with information about one's self, while sharing memories with someone who also was present can serve an intimacy or bonding function (Bluck et al., 2009; Fivush, Haden, & Reese, 1996). High ratings of memorability and emotions are also supported by the AM literature. Previous research suggests that emotionally intense events increase the accessibility of memories, particularly when they occur in young adulthood (Baddeley, 2009). This study was limited to young adults, so previous research serves as a potential explanation for our findings.

The strong negative correlation we found between mind wandering and other compelling-ness metrics is supported by text processing theory. If a listener's mind is not engaged in the story, theory shows that the listener is less likely to be compelled by the story across other metrics. According to Gerrig & Jacovina (2009), engaged listeners "function as side participants to narrative events: they encode participatory responses as reactions to characters' utterances and actions" (p. 225). A distracted listener is unlikely to encode responses such as memory, interest, or emotion. If a participant's mind is wandering during a story, he or she is unlikely to be compelled because the brain isn't working to achieve narrative coherence. In other words, distracted listeners are less likely to determine a story's relevance to their life and will thus be less likely to find the story compelling in other ways. Our

findings align with those of previous research examining how listeners comprehend stories.

We predicted that *who* was telling the story was an important predictor of compelling-ness. Previous research has uncovered significant gender differences in AM retrieval and recall. Bohanek, Fivush, & Walker (2005) found that women's memories of emotional events differ by valence and intensity. We anticipated gender differences to arise from our sample of *Moth* stories; however, our findings suggest that storyteller gender does not significantly predict compelling-ness. People found stories told by males and females to be roughly equally compelling. We also predicted that the expertise level of the storyteller might yield significant differences in listener ratings. This prediction was confirmed by our results, which suggested that on average, people find stories told by novice storytellers more compelling than stories told by experienced storytellers. We hypothesize that experienced storytellers are featured on *The Moth* because they maintain an ability to craft a cohesive and entertaining story based on any type life experience or event. Novice storytellers, on the other hand, are only likely to be featured on *The Moth* or compelled to tell a story in the first place because they have experienced a highly story-worthy event. As Wertsch & Roediger (2008) indicated, listeners may be more interested in unique stories because they deviate from the lifescript. It follows that people found the novice storytellers more compelling due to the uniqueness of the storyteller's experience rather than the caliber of their storytelling technique. This explanation aligns with the idea that good stories don't care where they come from, as long as the uniqueness of the event is shared.

We also predicted that *what* the story was about might be an important predictor of compelling-ness. According to Wertsch & Roediger (2008), individuals are "socially situated" such that they share a common set of cultural tools and narrative themes when they recount and understand events. This finding led us to anticipate that listeners might find a story compelling based on its theme because themes represent a comforting commonality among individuals in a culture. The moral of a story often connects the individual with the collective. Our results support this prediction because we found theme to be a significant predictor of story compelling-ness.

Specifically, people found negatively toned stories more compelling across all metrics. Previous research has explained the appeal of negatively themed stories for social comparison or emotional regulation purposes. According to studies on emotional regulation, engagement in a negative story allows listeners to feel certain emotions or distract themselves from others (Gross, Richards, & John, 2006). Zillmann (1996) argued that relief of a happy ending combats the anxiety of horror or sad stories, but that listeners can enjoy stories even without a happy ending. Social comparison studies also suggest that we may enjoy negative stories because they validate feelings that we are better off than others, that others share our struggles and weaknesses, or that we should appreciate our life in comparison. Bohanek, Fivush, & Walker (2005) found that negative events were rated as more emotional than positive events. Berntsen (2002) found that tunnel memories (enhanced memory for the central details of an event) are limited to emotionally negative memories.

We also predicted that the humor content of a story might yield significant differences in listener ratings. Previous studies have examined differences in memory recall of narratives with goals of entertainment vs. goals of accuracy. Dudukovic, Marsh, & Tversky (2004) found that entertaining stories "may be fun for the listener, but such inaccurate rehearsal does not help participants to later provide detailed accounts" (p. 141). This finding informed our prediction that humorous (entertaining) stories might be rated as less memorable, and our results suggested that humor content did not significantly influence how compelling listeners were by our sample of *Moth* stories.

Finally, we predicted that *how* the story was told might influence listener ratings. According to Newman, Groom, Handelman et al.'s (2008) research on gender differences in language usage, there are "small but systematic differences in the way that men and women use language, both in terms of what they say and how they choose to say it" (p. 233). Our findings aligned with this, as we only discovered small systematic differences in the way men and women use language in our pool of stories. Newman et al. (2008) concluded that men used significantly more swear words than females, but our dataset yielded the opposite result, with females using slightly more swear words in our sample. Perhaps this discrepancy is explained by the differences in the types of narratives we analyzed. The significant differences we found in the language usage of novice and experienced storytellers are not addressed in previous research, but replication of computerized text analysis on other stories would be useful to further assess the patterns we discovered. The significant language differences in stories with and without humor

are also unexplored in previous research, so replication of this particular theme would be useful. That said, we predicted that humorous stories would contain more informal language, and our data did confirm that prediction. Also, Bohanek, Fivush, & Walker's (2005) study was consistent with our finding that negatively toned stories tended to be longer in duration. Overall, it is difficult to generalize the trends that we found in the language usage of storytellers because not enough text analysis of stories has been conducted and our sample was relatively small.

Plot Holes and Sequels?

There are several limitations to our study. We were unable to explore all of the story elements that might influence listener ratings in this study; however, the high variability in our data is promising because it allows relationships to emerge and to be further mined in future research. Our methodology lends itself to avenues of future research to delve into the complexity of stories and how listeners experience them. The current study is only generalizable to one type of personal story, namely a specific set of *Moth* podcast stories. *Moth* stories ultimately share an entertainment function and are polished for stage performance. In future studies, it would be useful to analyze listeners' experience of other types of personal stories and other mediums of narrative expression such as diary entries, blogs, stand-up comedy bits, or conversations between people.

Furthermore, the participants in our study were all psychology undergraduate students at the University of Texas. Extending this research to a more diverse range of listeners and audiences is necessary, and other individual difference factors should also be examined. Audience is a key variable in how stories

are told and retold. The way we tell stories is largely shaped by our audience, so mapping this factor is important in determining what makes personal stories compelling. Because our dataset was limited to highly polished stories with an unspecific audience, it proved difficult manipulate the audience variable. Future studies could potentially measure how a storyteller specifically references the audience. It would also be interesting to analyze audience reaction to *Moth* stories. Listener reactions may provide valuable insight into what constitutes a "good" story. If the storyteller knows audience members personally, for example, it may influence the storyteller's delivery style or how compelling listeners find the story.

Future studies could also examine different story elements that might predict listener feedback such as why the story is being told. We decided not to code for the why factor because it was too difficult to meaningfully and objectively categorize the goals of the storytellers in our sample. Our initial attempt to categorize the why factor based on the three functions of AM (directive, self, and social) proved unsuccessful because many of the stories incorporated all three functions. Other potentially influential *who* factors such as the race, age, and socioeconomic status of the storyteller should be examined. Other potentially influential *what* factors such as themes of suspense, identity, death, and spirituality should also be examined. It might even be interesting to categorize stories by whether or not they had a happy ending. Our study only coded for themes that produced a strong and even dichotomy, but future research could mine more nuanced themes. Future studies could also divide negative and positive valence by different metrics. Other potentially influential *how* factors such as explicit audience

references, audience intrusions (laughter, clapping, or gasping) should be examined. Our survey could be adapted to ask more substantive questions to explore the listener's rationale deeply. For example, we could ask who in particular the listener is compelled to share a story with rather than simply how likely the listener is to share the story. Our survey could also ask more open-ended questions to account for individual differences among listeners, such as questioning why the listener found the story compelling in their own words rather than having listeners simply rate the stories on a numerical scale. Another application of our dataset would be to map the story elements that may predict compelling-ness onto existing cultural guidelines for how to tell a compelling story. For example, *The Moth* website features a "storytelling tips" article that gives people advice on how to tell a *Moth* caliber story. It would be interesting to see if *Moth* storytellers actually follow these guidelines to understand whether there is some general societal consensus as to what constitutes a compelling story.

Our study was a meaningful first step in understanding what makes the stories of other people compelling to listeners. One thing is certain: we tend to care about the personal stories of other people. Our study has confirmed the cliché that everyone loves a good story. Clearly, stories serve some sort of powerful function for the human psyche. We find it meaningful to tell and listen to personal stories. The specific elements of a story that make it powerful still need to be better actualized, understood, and harnessed. The applications potentially lead to the betterment of people's lives on both an individual and communal scale. The true power of narrative remains largely untapped. If we know what makes a story

compelling to others, we can begin to actively harness narrative for practical purposes such as business, advertising, entertainment, and journalism, as well as for other humanistic purposes such as therapy, education, and community building. As the great storyteller Tahir Shah once said, “stories are a communal currency of humanity”. If stories really do serve universally beneficial functions for humanity, it is essential that we develop a deeper understanding and appreciation of such functions.

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TABLE 1. Descriptive Statistics of Survey Ratings

Compelling Metric	*M*	*SD*	*Max*	*Min*
Interest	3.2	1.2	4.4	1.7
Transportation	2.7	1.1	4.1	1.6
Mind Wander	2.5	1.1	3.5	1.8
Emotions	2.6	1.1	4.4	1.6
Life Relevance	2.0	1.1	3.2	1.3
Learn	2.5	1.1	3.9	1.6
Future Use	2.2	1.1	3.8	1.3
Share	2.5	1.3	4.2	1.3
Remember	2.8	1.3	4.1	1.9
Hear Again	2.7	1.1	3.8	1.9

Note. See Appendix C for survey measures.

TABLE 2. Interest Ratings by Story

Story Title	*M*	*SD*
Dinner At Elaine's	1.7	0.5
About To Eat Cake	2.1	1.2
Alone Across The Arctic	2.4	0.7
A Country Boy's Journey	2.5	1.3
A Grave Predicament	2.6	0.9
Aloha	2.6	1.3
200 One-Of-A-Kind Shirts	2.7	1.0
As If I Was Not There	2.7	1.8
Almost Famous	2.8	1.1
30 Days Off Crack and Cute	2.8	1.2
The Interview	2.9	0.8
A House Divided	2.9	0.9
A Change Of Plans	3.0	0.8
Baggage Claim	3.0	0.8
A Time Of Hope	3.0	0.8
A Father's Pride	3.0	1.4
A Very Tiny Grownup	3.0	1.3
A Detroiter in Paris	3.0	1.8
Empathetic Subway Screaming	3.1	1.6
Alternate Ithaca Tom	3.1	1.3
Cannot Tell A Lie	3.1	1.1
California Gothic	3.2	1.0
An Extra Hotdog	3.2	1.2
To Catch a Teef	3.3	0.8
Free Lunch	3.3	1.1
The Ghost Of Rue Jacob	3.3	1.0
A Toast	3.3	1.3
Babushka's Revenge	3.3	1.2
Alex And Me	3.4	1.3
Adult Chat Room Adventures	3.4	0.7
Joy	3.4	1.3
An Impossible Choice	3.4	1.6
Terms They Don't Teach You In Girl Scouts	3.4	1.0
A New Map Of The World	3.5	1.0
About Your Mother	3.6	1.0
An Unplanned Exhibition	3.6	1.0
A Crushing Connection	3.6	0.9
In His Own Skin	3.7	0.9
About You and Me	3.7	1.0
11p.m. Mass	3.8	1.0
A Dish Best Served Cold	3.8	0.6
Ashes To Ashes, Dad To Dust	3.8	1.1
A Father Figures	3.9	0.4

Flight	3.9	0.7
800 Heroes	4.1	0.8
The Best Of Times, The Worst Of Times	4.3	0.7
A Very Dangerous Person	4.3	0.5
A Blind Ear	4.4	1.2

Note. Stories are organized in ascending order of average interest rating.

TABLE 3: Correlation Matrix showing Pearson's *r* for Survey Ratings

	Interest	Transportation	Mind Wander	Emotions	Life Relevance	Learn	Future Use	Share	Remember
Transportation	.65**								
Mind Wander	-.45**	-.34**							
Emotions	.66**	.57**	-.32**						
Life Relevance	.40**	.39**	-.19**	.44**					
Learn	.57**	.49**	-.26**	.60**	.41**				
Future Use	.58**	.56**	-.25**	.61**	.50**	.76**			
Share	.66**	.55**	-.35**	.64**	.46**	.60**	.66**		
Remember	.63**	.56**	-.38**	.58**	.41**	.61**	.60**	.68**	
Hear Again	.70**	.57**	-.36**	.60**	.43**	.58**	.61**	.72**	.67**

TABLE 4. Storyteller Gender and Survey Ratings. Mean survey ratings by storyteller gender (standard deviations in parentheses). Independent Samples Test for storyteller gender and mean survey ratings.

Compelling Metric	*Male*	*Female*	*t(46)*
Interest	3.3 (.61)	3.2 (.50)	-.291
Transportation	2.7 (.50)	2.7 (.59)	-.418
Mind Wander	2.5 (.43)	2.6 (.48)	.911
Emotions	2.7 (.60)	2.4 (.55)	-1.55
Life Relevance	2.0 (.53)	2.0 (.42)	-.443
Learn	2.6 (.50)	2.3 (.53)	-2.19
Future Use	2.3 (.52)	1.9 (.47)	-2.54
Share	2.6 (.60)	2.4 (.63)	-1.70
Remember	2.9 (.54)	2.7 (.65)	-1.55
Hear Again	2.8 (.50)	2.7 (.36)	-0.74

Note. See Appendix C for survey measures.

* $p < .05$.

** $p < .01$.

*** $p < .0001$.

TABLE 5. Storyteller Gender and Language Usage (LIWC). Mean language usage by storyteller gender (standard deviations in parentheses). Independent Samples Test for storyteller gender and language usage (LIWC).

LIWC Dimension	*Male*	*Female*	*t(46)*
Word Count	1624.9 (632.6)	1609.6 (761)	-0.076
Total Pronouns	20.5 (2.4)	21.0 (2.9)	0.590
Personal Pronouns	14.4 (2.3)	14.9 (2.6)	0.724
1st person singular	8.2 (1.7)	7.7 (1.5)	-0.847
1st person plural	1.0 (0.8)	1.4 (0.8)	1.712
2nd person	1.8 (1.0)	2.1 (1.0)	0.879
3rd person singular	2.7 (1.4)	3.0 (1.6)	0.656
3rd person plural	0.8 (0.6)	0.8 (0.5)	-0.086
Impersonal pronouns	6.1 (1.4)	6.0 (1.0)	-0.227
Affective processes	3.3 (0.8)	3.4 (0.7)	0.414
Positive emotion	2.1 (0.7)	2.2 (0.6)	0.411
Negative emotion	1.2 (0.5)	1.2 (0.4)	0.139
Social Processes	11.7 (2.8)	12.9 (3.4)	1.268
Cognitive Processes	9.8 (2.5)	10.2 (1.7)	0.552
Perceptual Processes	3.1 (1.1)	3.2 (1.1)	0.278
Biological Processes	2.0 (1.0)	1.7 (0.6)	-1.094
Drives	6.6 (1.5)	6.3 (1.4)	-0.804
Affiliation	2.1 (1.0)	2.6 (1.2)	1.392
Achieve	0.9 (0.6)	0.8 (0.3)	-0.801
Power	2.3 (0.6)	1.8 (0.4)	-2.851**
Reward	1.4 (0.5)	1.2 (0.4)	-1.537
Risk	0.3 (0.2)	0.3 (0.3)	-0.626
Past focus	7.5 (2.3)	5.6 (2.1)	-2.848**
Present focus	9.7 (3.2)	11.8 (3.2)	2.235*
Future focus	1.2 (0.4)	1.4 (0.6)	1.428
Relativity	15.4 (2.3)	15.0 (2.7)	-0.509
Work	1.7 (1.2)	1.3 (0.7)	-1.250
Leisure	1.2 (0.8)	0.9 (0.7)	-1.394
Home	0.7 (0.4)	1.0 (1.0)	1.625
Money	0.7 (0.8)	0.4 (0.5)	-1.548
Religion	0.3 (0.4)	0.3 (0.5)	0.083
Death	0.3 (0.5)	0.3 (0.4)	-0.002
Informal Language	1.1 (0.6)	1.7 (1.0)	2.729**
Swear words	0.1 (0.1)	0.2 (0.3)	2.067*

Note. Values represent average percent of words in each story.

* $p < .05$.

** $p < .01$.

*** $p < .0001$.

TABLE 6. Storyteller Expertise and Survey Ratings. Mean survey ratings by storyteller expertise (standard deviations in parentheses). Independent Samples Test for survey ratings and storyteller expertise.

Survey Rating	*Expert*	*Non-Expert*	*t(46)*
Interest	3.13 (.59)	3.42 (.47)	-1.860
Transportation	2.62 (.59)	2.78 (.44)	-1.010
Mind Wander	2.62 (.48)	2.39 (.37)	1.803
Emotions	2.49 (.63)	2.77 (.50)	-1.677
Life Relevance	1.93 (.50)	2.10 (.47)	-1.198
Learn	2.40 (.54)	2.69 (.48)	-1.899
Future Use	2.07 (.58)	2.30 (.43)	-1.485
Share	2.41 (.65)	2.68 (.57)	-1.441
Remember	2.73 (.63)	2.95 (.54)	-1.272
Hear Again	2.66 (.46)	2.88 (.38)	-1.786

Note. See Appendix C for survey measures.

* $p < .05$.

** $p < .01$.

*** $p < .0001$.

TABLE 7. Storyteller Expertise and Language Usage (LIWC). Mean language usage by storyteller expertise (standard deviations in parentheses). Independent Samples Test for language usage and storyteller expertise.

LIWC Dimension	*Expert*	*Non-Expert*	*t(46)*
Word Count	1688.9 (722.9)	1519.9 (622.6)	.845
Total Pronouns	20.0 (2.5)	21.7 (2.4)	-2.391*
Personal Pronouns	14.1 (2.4)	15.4 (2.3)	-1.824
1st person singular	7.8 (1.8)	8.2 (1.4)	-.655
1st person plural	1.2 (0.8)	1.2 (0.8)	.026
2nd person	1.9 (0.8)	1.9 (1.3)	.115
3rd person singular	2.5 (1.1)	3.3 (1.9)	-1.881
3rd person plural	0.7 (0.5)	0.9 (0.6)	-1.020
Impersonal pronouns	5.9 (1.1)	6.4 (1.3)	-1.359
Affective processes	3.5 (0.8)	3.3 (0.7)	.928
Positive emotion	2.2 (0.6)	2.1 (0.7)	.379
Negative emotion	1.3 (0.5)	1.1 (0.5)	1.017
Social Processes	11.7 (3.0)	12.9 (3.1)	-1.316
Cognitive Processes	9.8 (1.9)	10.1 (2.5)	-4.21
Perceptual Processes	3.2 (1.1)	3.0 (1.1)	.676
Biological Processes	1.9 (0.9)	1.8 (0.8)	.310
Drives	6.5 (1.5)	6.5 (1.3)	.077
Affiliation	2.3 (1.2)	2.3 (1.0)	.033
Achieve	0.9 (0.5)	0.9 (0.5)	.113
Power	2.1 (0.5)	2.1 (0.7)	.031
Reward	1.3 (0.5)	1.3 (0.5)	.357
Risk	0.3 (0.2)	0.3 (0.3)	-.458
Past focus	6.6 (2.4)	6.8 (2.5)	-.312
Present focus	10.6 (3.0)	10.7 (3.8)	-.123
Future focus	1.4 (0.5)	1.3 (0.5)	.578
Relativity	15.2 (2.7)	15.2 (2.1)	-.013
Work	1.4 (0.8)	1.8 (1.3)	-1.437
Leisure	1.3 (0.9)	0.7 (0.3)	2.706**
Home	0.9 (0.9)	0.7 (0.5)	.878
Money	0.6 (0.8)	0.5 (0.6)	.538
Religion	0.2 (0.4)	0.3 (0.5)	-.241
Death	0.2 (0.3)	0.4 (0.6)	-1.338
Informal Language	1.4 (0.9)	1.2 (0.9)	.688
Swear words	0.2 (0.3)	0.1 (0.1)	1.294

Note. Values represent average percent of words in each story.

* $p < .05$.

** $p < .01$.

*** $p < .0001$.

TABLE 8. Themes and Mean Survey Ratings

	Theme					
	Tone			Humor		
Survey Rating	*Positive*	*Negative*	*t(46)*	*Yes*	*No*	*t(46)*
Interest	3.05	3.53	-3.116**	3.18	3.32	-0.803
Transportation	2.50	2.97	-3.235**	2.58	2.81	-1.471
Mind Wander	2.62	2.36	1.929	2.51	2.53	-0.288
Emotions	2.35	2.99	-4.453***	2.40	2.83	-2.727**
Life Relevance	1.90	2.15	-1.711	1.99	2.02	-0.150
Learn	2.24	2.93	-5.717***	2.24	2.83	-4.459***
Future Use	1.91	2.54	-5.023***	1.95	2.40	-3.261**
Share	2.33	2.82	-2.874**	2.47	2.58	-0.596
Remember	2.61	3.13	-3.051**	2.67	3.00	-1.857
Hear Again	2.57	3.01	-3.811***	2.65	2.85	-1.693

* $p < .05$.
** $p < .01$.
*** $p < .0001$.

TABLE 9. Themes and Language Usage (LIWC)

	Theme					
	Tone			Humor		
LIWC Dimension	*Positive*	*Negative*	*t(46)*	*Yes*	*No*	*t(46)*
WC	1597.93	1649.89	-0.256	1431.3	1839.8	-2.148
pronoun	20.53	21.00	-0.613	20.6	20.9	-0.343
ppron	14.48	14.88	-0.557	14.5	14.8	-0.438
i	8.19	7.66	1.075	8.0	8.0	-0.065
we	1.08	1.32	-1.013	1.2	1.2	-0.045
you	1.87	1.97	-0.340	2.0	1.8	0.511
shehe	2.66	3.05	-0.880	2.7	2.9	-0.403
they	0.68	0.88	-1.176	0.7	0.9	-1.513
ipron	6.04	6.11	-0.197	6.1	6.0	0.119
affect	3.40	3.35	0.219	3.5	3.3	0.813
posemo	2.29	1.91	2.145*	2.2	2.0	1.298
negemo	1.09	1.40	-2.371*	1.2	1.2	-0.334
social	11.81	12.80	-1.093	12.1	12.3	-0.171
cogproc	9.81	10.16	-0.547	10.0	9.8	0.323
percept	3.33	2.79	1.725	3.2	3.0	0.596
bio	1.82	1.95	-0.522	1.9	1.8	0.423
drives	6.28	6.85	-1.361	6.5	6.6	-0.263
affiliation	2.32	2.33	-0.018	2.5	2.2	0.906
achieve	0.85	0.88	-0.193	0.8	1.0	-1.167
power	2.02	2.21	-1.086	2.0	2.2	-0.930
reward	1.22	1.38	-1.168	1.3	1.3	-0.431
risk	0.24	0.43	-2.903**	0.3	0.4	-1.927
focuspast	6.54	6.92	-0.528	6.1	7.4	-2.000*
focuspresent	10.90	10.17	0.745	11.3	9.8	1.556
focusfuture	1.35	1.27	0.534	1.4	1.3	0.834
relativ	15.57	14.75	1.139	15.3	15.2	0.179

work	1.52	1.56	-0.121	1.4	1.6	-0.688
leisure	1.16	0.87	1.342	0.9	1.2	-1.392
home	0.95	0.61	1.510	0.9	0.7	1.068
money	0.62	0.55	0.343	0.5	0.7	-1.169
relig	0.34	0.14	1.684	0.4	0.1	1.994*
death	0.18	0.41	-1.717	0.3	0.2	0.304
informal	1.39	1.21	0.688	1.6	1.0	2.224*
swear	0.12	0.13	-0.148	0.2	0.1	1.957

Note. Values represent average percent of words in each story.

* $p < .05$.

** $p < .01$.

*** $p < .0001$.

TABLE 10. Correlation Matrix showing Pearson's *r* for Language Usage (LIWC)

	WC	pronoun	affect	posemo	negemo	social	cogproc	percept	bio	drives	focuspast	focuspresent
pronoun	0.128											
affect	-0.132	0.09										
posemo	-0.102	0.10	.76**									
negemo	-0.104	0.02	.58**	-0.08								
social	-0.016	.66**	0.02	-0.03	0.06							
cogproc	-0.028	.32*	.42**	.46**	0.07	0.13						
percept	-0.070	-0.14	-0.06	-0.08	0.01	0.09	-0.35*					
bio	-0.136	-0.03	0.09	-0.02	0.18	-0.21	-0.07	-0.04				
drives	0.051	0.15	0.09	0.12	-0.02	0.24	0.10	-0.34*	-0.05			
focuspast	-0.015	-0.01	0.07	0.03	0.05	0.10	0.28	-0.28	-0.19	-0.06		
focuspresent	0.011	.41**	0.06	0.20	-0.14	0.22	0.03	0.21	0.04	0.27	-0.80**	
focusfuture	-0.043	-0.03	0.03	0.11	-0.09	-0.07	-0.15	0.06	-0.21	0.15	-0.34*	.43**

TABLE 11. Storyteller Demographics (*who*) and Story Themes (*what*) Cross tabulation

Storyteller		Theme			
		Tone		Humor	
		Positive	Negative	Yes	No
Gender					
	Male	16	12	12	16
	Female	13	7	14	6
Expertise					
	Expert	18	10	15	13
	Non-Expert	11	9	11	9

Appendix A

Story Demographic Measures:

#	Name	Title	Duration (min)	Biography	Gender	Expertise
1	Horace H.B. Sanders	About You and Me	14:15	Horace HB Sanders gets married and divorced and then remarried.	Male	Yes
2	Tom Weiser	Alternate Ithaca Tom	11:48	Dreams of what might have been plague a man during a road trip.	Male	Yes
3	Sarah Bunger	About Your Mother	6:04	Sarah Bunger becomes her father's best friend and confidant after her mother dies.	Female	No
4	Pilar Siman	11p.m. Mass	5:57	A college freshman falls in love at 11 p.m. Mass.	Female	No
5	Greg Walloch	About To Eat Cake	14:30	Greg Walloch goes to a faith healer in Georgia.	Male	Yes
6	Natalie Chanin	200 One-Of-A-Kind Shirts	13:40	After spending much of her life running away, a woman returns home to Alabama to manufacture the hand-sewn clothes she has designed.	Female	No
7	Paul Knoll	800 Heroes	11:56	A high school guidance counselor tries to keep his students safe.	Male	No
8	Neil Gaiman	A Father's Pride	13:20	Neil Gaiman becomes a proud hockey dad and learns how proud his own dad is of him.	Male	Yes
9	Tim King	A Change Of Plans	11:24	An educator takes in a troubled student after his mother dies.	Male	No
10	Dina Pearlman	30 Days Off Crack and Cute	8:08	A woman's new boyfriend may have a few issues, but at least he calls.	Female	Yes
11	Marco Huertas	An Extra Hotdog	4:11	Marco is haunted by a time he didn't give his extra hotdog to a hungry kid.	Male	No
12	Kambri Crews	A Blind Ear	14:04	A young woman discovers the truth about the relationship between her deaf parents.	Female	Yes
13	Kevin Boggs	A Country Boy's Journey	8:33	A college kid from a small town in Tennessee has a chance to see the world.	Male	Yes
14	Dame Wilburn	A Detroiter in Paris	7:16	Dameon takes a trip to Paris.	Female	Yes
15	Taylor Negron	California Gothic	14:50	A boy thinks his dreams have finally come true when he gets an exotic pet.	Male	Yes
16	Matthew Dicks	Free Lunch	6:29	A boy realizes that his family is poor.	Male	Yes
17	Molly Cameron	Almost Famous	6:47	Molly Cameron tries to re-create a spontaneous moment for an album cover.	Female	Yes
18	Margot Leitman	A Very Tiny Grownup	6:55	A young girl grows up too soon.	Female	Yes

19	Mel Dockery	Cannot Tell A Lie	5:06	An English woman has to answer a tough question on her US citizenship test.	Female	Yes
20	Paul Teodo	A Very Dangerous Person	6:01	A hitchhiker is picked up by an infamous driver.	Male	No
21	Annie Duke	A House Divided	15:41	A poker player learns perseverance from her parents.	Female	Yes
22	Tristan Jimerson	A Dish Best Served Cold	13:29	A case of credit card fraud sets an amateur sleuth on a crime-solving caper.	Male	No
23	Warren Macdonald	A Crushing Connection	17:29	A hiker details his journey home through a trial by stone.	Male	Yes
24	Irene Pepperberg	Alex And Me	15:27	A research scientist forms 30-year bond with an unlikely subject.	Female	No
25	Joan Buck	The Ghost Of Rue Jacob	15:22	After landing her dream job in Paris, Joan Juliet Buck, the new editor of French Vogue, is haunted in her dream apartment.	Female	Yes
26	Ivan Kuraev	Babushka's Revenge	5:22	A Russian grandmother takes revenge when her grandson is bullied.	Male	No
27	Anthony Griffith	The Best Of Times, The Worst Of Times	9:17	A comic must earn his living as a clown while suffering the ultimate heartbreak.	Male	Yes
28	Jia H. Jung	Ashes To Ashes, Dad To Dust	6:43	Jia H. Jung tries to figure out what to do with her father’s ashes.	Female	No
29	Andrew Solomon	A Time Of Hope	16:36	A writer travels to Afghanistan in search of art.	Male	Yes
30	Erin Barker	Terms They Don't Teach You In Girl Scouts	5:37	A friendship stands the test of time.	Female	Yes
31	Colin Channer	To Catch a Teef	10:52	Colin Channer is a kid in Jamaica with a deep love for comic books.	Male	Yes
32	Ashok Ramasubramanian	Joy	5:10	Ashok Ramasubramanian learns the joy of sharing.	Male	No
33	Chris Gilbert	In His Own Skin	12:55	Chris Gilbert is prepared to fight for his kindergartner.	Male	No
34	George Plimpton	Dinner At Elaine's	8:37	George Plimpton gives an auction winner a star-studded walk through the legendary NYC eatery Elaine's.	Male	Yes
35	Sasha Chanoff	An Impossible Choice	13:02	A humanitarian rescue worker is forced to decide whether he will break the rules to save more lives.	Male	No
36	Boris Timanovsky	A Grave Predicament	9:38	A Russian immigrant takes a trip home and tries to fulfill a promise to his mother without her hand-drawn map.	Male	No
37	Jennifer Sodini	An Unplanned Exhibition	5:31	Jennifer Sodini weighs the dangers of sprinting past a stranger or her neighbor in her skivvies.	Female	Yes
38	David Harris-Gershon	Adult Chat Room Adventures	6:04	A man comes up with a creative way to win votes.	Male	Yes
39	Tamara Jenkins	Aloha	12:51	A woman flies cross country to help the aging father she hasn't seen in 18 years.	Female	Yes
40	Pam Flowers	Alone Across The Arctic	13:20	Pam Flowers attempts to cross the Arctic solo with a dog team.	Female	Yes

41	Catherine Palmer	A Toast	6:36	Catherine Palmer takes her young sons on a work trip where they learn some inappropriate toasts, which they repeat at church.	Female	No
42	Al Letson	A Father Figures	13:04	Haunted with guilt, a father admits he was not quite ready for a second child.	Male	Yes
43	Bobby Stoddard	Flight	11:46	An avid skier saves the day.	Male	No
44	Juliet Hope Wayne	A New Map Of The World	7:32	When her dark past scares off her love interest, an artist changes her trajectory.	Female	No
45	Christine Blackburn	Baggage Claim	5:37	A flight attendant reveals the old-school way of dealing with in-flight disruptions.	Female	Yes
46	Jeff Simmermon	Empathetic Subway Screaming	5:20	Jeff Simmermon gets in a screaming match when he spills his groceries on the subway.	Male	Yes
47	Abishek Shah	The Interview	7:57	Abhishek Shah finally lands a job interview after graduation. Having practiced and prepared for any situation, he did not anticipate having to go out to sushi.	Male	No
48	Peter Pringle	As If I Was Not There	10:14	A man faces the death penalty for a crime he did not commit.	Male	No

Appendix B

Language Usage Measures:

LIWC Dimension	Abbrev	Examples	Words in category
Word Count	WC	-	-
Total Pronouns	pronoun	I, them, itself	153
Personal Pronouns	ppron	I, them, her	93
1st person singular	i	I, me, mine	24
1st person plural	we	we, us, our	12
2nd person	you	you, your, thou	30
3rd person singular	shehe	she, her, him	17
3rd person plural	they	they, their, they'd	11
Impersonal pronouns	ipron	it, it's, those	59
Affective processes	affect	happy, cried	1393
Positive emotion	posemo	love, nice, sweet	620
Negative emotion	negemo	hurt, ugly, nasty	744
Social Processes	social	mate, talk, they	756
Cognitive Processes	cogproc	cause, know, ought	797
Perceptual Processes	percept	look, heard, feeling	436
Biological Processes	bio	eat, blood, pain	748
Drives	drives		1103
Affiliation	affiliation	ally, friend, social	248
Achieve	achieve	win, success, better	213
Power	power	superior, bully	518
Reward	reward	take, prize, benefit	120
Risk	risk	danger, doubt	103
Past focus	focuspast	ago, did, talked	341
Present focus	focuspresent	today, is, now	424
Future focus	focusfuture	may, will, soon	97
Relativity	relativ	area, bend, exit	974

Work	work	job, majors, xerox	444
Leisure	leisure	cook, chat, movie	296
Home	home	kitchen, landlord	100
Money	money	audit, cash, owe	226
Religion	relig	altar, church	174
Death	death	bury, coffin, kill	74
Informal Language	informal		380
Swear words	swear	fuck, damn, shit	131

Note. This table represents a small subset of the LIWC dictionary.

Appendix C

Survey Measures:

After listening to each story, participants were asked the following questions:

1. How interesting did you find this story? (1-5 scale; 1 = not interesting at all, 5 = extremely interesting)

2. How much did you "lose yourself" in the story while listening? (ie you were so engrossed in the story that you were not focusing on anything else (1-5 scale; 1 = not at all lost in the story, 5 = completely lost in the story)

3. How much did you find your mind wandering during the story? (1-5 scale; 1 = none at all, 5 = a great deal)

4. Did you experience any emotions while listening to this story? (1-5 scale; 1 = not at all, 5 = a great deal)

5. How much did this story relate to your life? (1-5 scale; 1 = not relatable at all, 5 = extremely relatable)

6. How much did you learn from this story? (1-5 scale; 1 = none at all, 5 = a great deal)

7. How useful will this story be to you in the future? (1-5 scale; 1 = not at all useful, 5 = extremely useful)

8. How likely would you be to share this story with someone that you know? (1-5 scale; 1 = extremely unlikely, 5 = extremely likely)

9. How likely are you to remember this story a few months from now? (1-5 scale; 1 = extremely unlikely, 5 = extremely likely)

10. Would you ever want to hear this story again? (1-5 scale; 1 = definitely not, 5 = definitely yes)

11. Listener Check (a specific question related to each story's content designed to test whether participant listened to the story in its entirety)

Listener Checks:

#	Listener Check
1	Q: How many children does the storyteller have? A: 9
2	Q: What University does the storyteller visit in the story? A: Cornell University
3	Q: By the end of the story, how often does the storyteller talk to her dad? A: They text everyday.
4	Q: What news does the storyteller's crush reveal to her? A: He's going to be a priest.
5	Q: What southern state does the storyteller visit his friend in? A: Georgia
6	Q: What business does the storyteller open at the end of the story? A: A textile business sewing t-shirts
7	Q: What was the name of the school shooter's name? A: Andy
8	Q: What does the storyteller find out about his dad at the end of the story? A: He was at his book signing.
9	Q: What is Keith's profession at the end of the story? A: A teacher
10	Q: What is the name of the storyteller's boyfriend? A: Steve
11	Q: Where did the storyteller buy his hotdogs? A: Gas station
12	Q: What legal punishment did the storyteller's father receive for his actions? A: 4 years probation
13	Q: What American rock band did the storyteller perform with? A: Foreigner
14	Q: What event causes the storyteller to go "Detroit" on the vendor? A: He tries to tie a bracelet on her wrist.
15	Q: What kind of pet does the storyteller adopt in the story? A: A monkey
16	Q: What kind of race does the storyteller have with his friend at the end of the story? A: bike race
17	Q: What does the storyteller wear to the photo shoot? A: A romper
18	Q: What is the name of the man that the storyteller phones? A: Paul
19	Q: What American city does the storyteller visit at the end of the story? A: Boston
20	Q: What did the storyteller learn about the man he hitchiked with at the end of the story? A: He was executed for killing 33 young men.
21	Q: What game does the storyteller play at the end of the story? A: Poker
22	Q: What does the storyteller jokingly refer to himself at the end of the story? A: A Private Eye
23	Q: What mountain does the storyteller summit at the end of the story? A: Cradle Mountain
24	Q: What type of bird is Alex? A: A grey parrot
25	Q: What does the new apartment owner say about the apartment at the end of the story? A: It's so haunted
26	Q: What tool does the storyteller's grandma use to destroy the fort? A: A big kitchen knife
27	Q: What show did the storyteller appear on at the end of the story? A: The Tonight Show (with Johnny Carson)

28 Q: What does the storyteller drink at the graveyard? A: Vodka

29 Q: What country does the storyteller travel to? A: Afghanistan

30 Q: What does the storyteller's friend do before they get out of the car? A: Cries

31 Q: What did the storyteller steal in the story? A: Books

32 Q: What candy does the storyteller talk about? A: Kit Kat

33 Q: What does the storyteller's kid rename himself when he begins to identify as a male? A: Brody

34 Q: What meal was Woody Allen eating in the story? A: Chicken Francese

35 Q: Who is the storyteller worried about preventing the people from leaving the Congo? A: The Congalese immigration officers

36 Q: Who picked up the storyteller from the airport at the end of his trip to Russia? A: His parents

37 Q: Who does the storyteller run into while she runs up the stairs in her underwear? A: Her neighbor's girlfriend

38 Q: What was Trent's true identity? A: An elderly woman

39 Q: What happens to the storyteller's father on the airplane? A: He has to go to the bathroom // his pants fall down.

40 Q: What wild animal does the storyteller come across on her journey? A: A bear

41 Q: What does the storyteller's son say at the party that causes a ruckus? A: "Let's drink to long-legged women"

42 Q: What does the storyteller pay for in the graveyard at the end of the story? A: A marker for his daughter.

43 Q: What does the storyteller catch on the ski mountain? A: A baby

44 Q: What does Pete say to the storyteller at the end of the story? A: I'm in love with you

45 Q: What happens to Mr. Klein on the airplane? A: He dies.

46 Q: What does the storyteller spill on the subway? A: His groceries

47 Q: What food does the storyteller spill on the employer at the sushi restaurant? A: Chicken Soup

48 Q: What kind of tree does the storyteller visit at the end of the story? A: Apple Tree

Demographic Measures:

At the conclusion of the survey, participants were asked to fill out a brief demographics questionnaire. Answering each question on the questionnaire was optional.

1. Was anything confusing about this survey? If so, please explain (response optional).

2. Sex?
   - Male
   - Female

3. Ethnicity?
   - Hispanic or Latino
   - Not Hispanic or Latino
   - Other (please explain)

4. Race?
   - American Indian / Alaska Native
   - Asian
   - Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander
   - Black or African American
   - White
   - More Than One Race
   - Other (please explain)

5. Name? (for accreditation purposes)

Biography

Hava Kane's story began in St. Louis, MO, were she was born and raised. She moved to Dallas, TX before her sophomore year of high school and attended Greenhill School. Hava never anticipated finding home in the state of Texas, but she is incredibly grateful that she somehow landed at the University of Texas at Austin and started saying "y'all". Since she's far from satisfied with her knowledge of the city and its offerings, Hava is excited to begin a new chapter as a technology recruiter in the heart of Austin. When she's not attempting to write a thesis, Hava enjoys spending quality time with her crazy family, especially her dog Cosmo (the most important male in her life). She also enjoys watching people in airports, singing sad folk songs on her ukulele, pretending to have skills in outdoor recreation, putting herself in food comas, day-dreaming about the future, spontaneously dancing to funk music, sending savage snapchats, and chewing gum at an obnoxiously loud volume.